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That Old Hag

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that old hag.

by emma mcmullen

As the sun set, snowflakes fell, and Lev knelt on packed snow at the base of a hill. Cupped between his hands, he held a pile of ashes. This was his last task for the day, and by now he had memorized the words that would complete the ceremony of transition from this world to the next.

“Komu pora, temu czas.” When it is your time, you must go. He took in a breath of winter air that bit at his throat and blew the ashes from his hands. They fluttered through the air to the ground like stardust. He smoothed down the surface of the snow where he had sprinkled the last ashes of the day. Lev drew a circle in the snow. His fingers were calloused and cracked, and his hangnails threatened infection. He pulled a scrap of paper from his corduroy shirt and read from it.

“Babushka Svetlana.”

A frail woman levitated in the circle. She sat on a rocking chair that she never left and knitted a scarlet scarf that was never long enough—even after decades of following the same pattern.

“Dzień dobry, Babushka.” Folds of wrinkled skin concealed small onyx irises.

“It’s you again is it?” Babushka shook her head.

“Babushka, I’m the only one that summons you anymore, after what happened in October. No one believes a word you say after that stunt.”

Her irises roared with fire like obsidian. Lev lowered his head.

“What have you summoned me for then? Just to tell me how obsolete I am?” Babushka’s knitting needles crescendoed in a flurry of red and stained pine. “I have more important things to attend to than listening to you spew nonsense. I am the keeper of time and death, and I bow before no —”

“Babushka, please. I wish to check the daily deaths with your record.”

“Ah yes.” Babushka sighed and pulled a thin pair of reading glasses from her bee’s hive of hair. She squinted at a piece of thick rough paper, folded and clenched in sweaty hands for centuries. “I see three names. Liuda Popov. Luka Vasiliev. Tamryn Petrov.”

“Thank you Babushka.” Lev reached into his pocket to retrieve the paper with the words to release her from the circle, but Babushka laughed with the strength of a diamond.

“You still read from that, do you?”

Lev blushed. “I’m only the crematorium operator. They don’t give me formal training or fancy spells or anything. What do you expect from me?”

“Alright, no need to get defensive. Anyway, I have some stories to tell. Sit, sit.”

Lev let out a heavy sigh, but hastily abided, falling into a cross-legged position. He went about the business of covering and uncovering the ashes with snow.

“In the year 1335, I was just a teen much like you and, rather promiscuous too if you can believe it, and I met...”

He moved the ashes from side to side, careful to avoid disturbing the circle. These ashes had once been the body of a twelve-year-old. No one was there to say Do Widzenia. Goodbye. Now, this is all that’s left. Lev took up a handful of snow and sprinkled it over the ashes until they were concealed.

“... and next on the list is Shura Kresnikov. Poor thing.”

The Lev froze at the sound of that name but did not look up from the dirt. “When?”

“I really must be going.” Babushka stowed her glasses back in her hair and shuffled her knitting around.

“When Babushka?” Lev asked louder this time.

Babushka sighed and set down her needles. “Too soon.”

Lev nodded. "Do widzenia."

Babushka disappeared and left nothing but a small bit of the red yarn.

Lev kicked at the snow and the ashes he had smoothed down flew into the air. The wind picked up and pushed his fur collar up against his neck. Lev trotted down the steep hill into the little town where he lived.

When he reached the main street, a brick building blocked the wind and drifts of snow which moved horizontally across the ground. His fur collar folded down onto his shoulders. He passed the homes of the people in his community: the butcher, the postwoman, the firefighter, the doctor. Not one of them knew he existed. He fantasized about going to what he imagined were their fancy parties where everyone laughed and clinked their glasses. He had never clinked a glass.

Completely charred by darkness now, the sky was brimming with stars and each glimmered as he saw them, their way of waving hello. Everyone knew about the stars and the spirits that lived among them. It was all so romantic. But no one even acknowledged that the physical bodies had to be dealt with somehow. Unless they were using it to make fun of him. The crematorium was just on the other side of the hill. Co z oczu, to z serca. Out of sight, out of mind.

He passed a final house, the house of the person whose name Babushka uttered: Shura. Lev had always admired Shura and wanted nothing more than to impress them. Shura only knew Lev as an acquaintance, the kind of acquaintance that came only out of circumstance; the two of them were around the same age and would pass each other on the street and politely nod, and then Shura would smile. With a smile like that, Lev was sure they had clinked a whole slew of glasses. Lev hoped Shura would remember him in the kind of way one hopes to find the sapphire ring somewhere underneath the sink, despite having just seen it fall down the drain.

Lev's small home was on the end of the village farthest from the hill, but he didn't mind the walk. He slid inside and tightened the makeshift rope lock against the wind. The cor-

rugated steel walls were rusting again. He laid on his back and pulled a wool blanket over himself, holding the monogrammed corner tightly. Speckles of water fell onto his face. A small gap in the roof exposed the light from a star that shined brightly. He held his arms around himself thinking of Shura's smile.

Lev took pride in his job as the crematorium operator. He was able to make sure the physical bodies of the deceased were peacefully laid to rest. But the thought of shutting the door of the oven on Shura? He shuddered. Lev cracked his door open and drew a circle in the snow just outside his home.

Babushka glimmered into view, knitting away. "What are you doing up at this hour? Are there new deaths to report?"

"No, Babushka." Lev looked down, not in respect, but to hide his blushing cheeks. "Do you make the pattern yourself?"

"Don't be silly. I simply follow the pattern. I may be the keeper of time, but I'm not the creator of it. We all have bosses."

"Do you know if anyone who has made a mistake or changed the pattern, even by one stitch?"

Babushka's needles froze.

Lev looked up.

Babushka resumed her work. "Yes."

"Who? What happened?" Lev leaned forward.

Babushka shook her head and chuckled. "I will tell you a story. There was a young girl, exceptionally curious, quite like you actually. She lusted after one of her peers—"

"No, I'm not lusting after anyone!" Lev blushed and shook his head wildly.

"Oh, calm down child. She lusted after one of her peers and wanted nothing more than to save them from their death."

Lev perked up again. "Did she succeed?"

"Just a minute now. She did succeed. She saved this peer, but —"

"How did she do it?"

"She snipped my yarn."

Lev dropped his shoulders that had risen with interest. "Oh."

"Do you wish to snip my yarn?"

"No, Babushka, I —"

"Do you wish for Shura to avoid their death?"

"Yes, but—"

Babushka took a pair of thin scissors from her hair and snipped her red yarn.

"Babushka!" The red yarn curled into coils on her lap and the ends turned brown as if they had been cauterized.

"Go to them, child. Tell them that they have been saved and they will see another day."

"Babushka, I don't think I —"

"Go!"

Lev rushed to the skinny brick house he had passed moments before. He knocked on the door with more enthusiasm than intended. He knocked again. Shura came to the door and cracked it open. Stifled laughter came from inside.

"Lev? What are you doing here?"

"I—I'm here because I have something very important to tell you." Lev's fingers shook, but the corners of his mouth rose into a smile. From the inside of the house, he heard someone mocking him.

"Guys, shut up," Shura whispered into the house. "Anyway, you were saying?"

"Today, I was just talking with Babushka Svetlana, and —"

"That old hag?" Shura laughed. Shura put on a scrunched up face. "The keeper of time." Shura mocked Babushka's voice. "No one falls for that bullshit anymore."

Lev's smile melted away. "She told me that you were next on her list of people to die and I saved you." Lev blurted the last bit out so quickly, spittle flew onto the door separating him from the inside of the house.

"Did you really believe her?" Shura laughed.

"He is an ash boy. Ash boys will believe anything," a voice from inside called.

The color left Lev's face completely. "I saved your life. Babushka had to cut her yarn. To save you!"

That only made Shura and the group on the inside laugh harder.

"Good one, ash boy." Shura nodded.

"It's not a joke! Why won't you just listen

to what I'm saying?" Lev wrapped his fingers into fists in the hope that they would stop violently shaking.

"I don't have to listen to you."

Lev turned and left without another word. The door slammed shut. Shura laughed with their friends. A melodic chant echoed from the house. "Ash boy, ash boy." His walking turned to running, and he slid inside his rusty hut. Babushka still levitated outside; she wove a new piece of yarn in with the previous.

She gave him a look of pity over her reading glasses. "I'm guessing it went not so good?"

Lev wrapped the wool blanket around himself and stared up at the lonely star visible through the gap in the ceiling. "Did you know?"

"Nothing could have been done." Babushka sighed. "Komu pora, temu czas." She knitted her scarf of time, her needles gliding silently across the yarn. Babushka rocked back and forth and back and forth. The lonely star in the night sky winked at Lev with a twinkle. Grey snowflakes fell onto his face and melted into the tears on his cheeks.



arms ▲

by mary mccormick